

# Object Constancy and Early Triadic Relationships

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This paper traces the development of object constancy in childhood development and addresses the complexity of interrelated factors that must be taken into account for the appropriate application of the concept. The practical applications of this theoretical construct are discussed and the concept is examined within the context of the child's multiple primary relationships.

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The concept of object constancy gained significance during the decade of the 1970s. The concept refers to the state of human object relations in which the child can retain the memory and emotional tie to parents—his or her primary love objects—even when they are a source of ambivalent feelings, of frustration and disappointment, or when they are absent. Thus, the achievement of object constancy is considered to be a milestone in normal development, and its absence is an indicator of abnormal development. It is assumed that the achievement of object constancy, beginning with a recognition of the constant object in the second half of the first year, reaches a level of structuralization of the function as defined above at about the age of 3. Thus, we consider this to be a critical period in which unfolding object relations lead to the emergence of a clear separation between object and self-representation. This paper addresses the complexity of interrelated factors that must be taken into account for the appropriate application and elaboration of the concept of object constancy. The practical applications of this theoretical construct will be referred to briefly.

An examination of the evolution of object constancy in the context of the child's *multiple* primary relationships, and the necessity of following this achievement throughout the next developmental phases, is presented in order to avoid equating constancy with permanency. (The practical application of this theoretical proposition is of great significance in considering the risks, standards and utilization of day care for young children whose parent or parents work.) The term object constancy may be misleading unless it is clearly defined and understood in the context of progressive developmental reorganization and consolidation. Thus, the capacity for object constancy takes on the characteristics of a psychic structure that can be in-

ferred in terms of its earliest manifestations and followed in its changing role throughout the life cycle, while it retains a historical continuity with its origins in the second half of the first year of life (Hartmann, 1952).

At the age of 3 there is a consolidation and reorganization of various lines of development. We find, at this time, the emergence of an awareness of sex differences and with it a new dimension in the relationship of the child to the parents as the role of gender and the fabric of sexual role assignment moves into the foreground of developmental differentiation. We are referring here to the beginning of the phallic phase and the emergence of phallic primacy. When we follow Mahler et al.'s (1975) propositions, we see, at the age of 3, the capacity to achieve separation—separateness and individuation. These are two different developmental tracks. Mahler relates object constancy to the track which follows the capacity for separateness, that is to say, for the achievement of a sufficiently stable object representation, relatively independent of the child's need for the mother's continuous stimulation and gratification and of her physical presence.

From the beginning of life, the child is dependent and needs nurturing, gratification and stimulation in all areas of physical and psychic functioning. In this connection, it is important to differentiate object relatedness from object relationship. Object relatedness, with its complex interaction between infant and mother, demands the mother's presence and the direct interaction experience, whereas object relationship refers to the process through which there is an internalization of the influence and impact of the love object as a psychic representation. Both processes continue through childhood and to varying degrees throughout adult life. It is the capacity for object relationships in early life that is the basis for transference experiences as compared to those experiences we refer to as object relatedness.

The child slowly builds an inner "representational world" by the processes of incorporation and, later, of

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identification, leading to a more consolidated inner psychic structure that provides stability in the absence of the nurturing adult. That part of the representational world stemming from the image of significant others is referred to as object relations. Conversely, object relatedness—or the need for direct social experience—will continue throughout life, as seen in experiments on isolation, which often lead to manifestations of rapid ego disorganization. The internal representation of the world will never be enough to maintain itself on its own and to secure appropriate psychic function without the demands and feedback of significant aspects of an average expectable environment. Object relatedness is not succeeded by object relationship, but there is a vital interplay of both throughout life. Thus, internal stability and functioning cannot be described or evaluated without understanding the synchronization of internal and external demands.

A sense of trust fosters the child's ability to delay gratification. Feeling protected by that trust in the primary love object, the child anticipates reliable reunions, based on recognition, evocative memories, and a relative sense of anxiety-free separateness. The evocative memories may refer to a variety of subjective experiences with inner representations of the object. This leads us to reconfirm our assumption that such object representation cannot be limited to the internalization of the "image" of mother; though the availability of a comforting psychic representation of the mother is an essential component of what constitutes a primary child-parent relationship. The child experiences the earliest relatedness to mother through all sensory modalities and forms memories in relationship to touch, voices, smell, motor and postural interactions and affect interplay, in addition to visual experiences. Such representations are organized and experienced in a composite manner. Earlier object representations, therefore, may refer to a feeling tone and emotional state which reflect earlier experiences or which may in derivation connect with the mother's touch and voice in various mixtures. Such representations can be traced in psychoanalytic treatment or at times of inspired memory to the intensity of the mother-child qualities in which either one or the other, or some composite grouping of remembered experiences turn out to signify how component experiences characterize the uniqueness of a particular mother-child relationship.

These introductory definitions and assumptions indicate the need to see a continuum in the evolvment of secure psychic functions and structures, stressing the need to see object constancy as an ego function that crystallizes at around 2½ years of age. However,

object constancy undergoes many progressions and transformations during further development.

### Attachment

There is an extensive literature on theoretical and observational aspects of bonding that forms an essential background to the understanding of the concept of object constancy. As Bowlby (1969) has pointed out, the assessment of attachment is best seen in the response of the child to the physical absence of the mother and to the loss of the object, and in the response of the infant when the mother is physically present, but emotionally absent. In speaking about attachment, Bowlby has characterized the relationship as one that is persistent over time and in differing situations with someone "perceived as older and wiser." It is also clear that there is a complementary system, that is, the capacity to bond depends as much on the mother as it does on the child. From a biological point of view, the helpless infant's need for protection is an ingredient which leads to attachment. Freud (1926) states it in the following way: "The biological factor is the long period of time during which the young of the human species is in a condition of helplessness and dependence. Its intra-uterine existence seems to be short in comparison with that of most animals, and it is sent into the world in a less finished state. As a result, the influence of the real external world upon it is intensified and an early differentiation between the ego and the id is promoted. Moreover, the dangers of the external world have a greater importance for it, so that the value of the object which can alone protect it against them and take the place of its former intra-uterine life is enormously enhanced. The biological factor, then, establishes the earliest situations of danger and creates the need to be loved which will accompany the child through the rest of its life" (pp. 154–155).

There have been many investigations that address themselves to the various sensory modalities and action components which are operative in the process of attachment, including affective interplay and cognition. Fraiberg (1969) explores the function of memory, the pathway of cognition, in its relationship to the libidinal component. She differentiates recognition and evocative memory. Thus she refers to maturational functions which determine the child's capacity to respond on different levels to external experiences.

Similarly, Hartmann (1952) refers to it in a precise way: "There is a long way from the object that exists only as long as it is need satisfying to that form of satisfactory object relation that includes object constancy . . . This constancy probably presupposes on the side of the ego a certain degree of neutralization of aggressive as well as libidinal energy" (p. 163). In

Hartmann's thinking, there is a transformation of drive energy into ego energy in order to achieve a new ego structure.

In line with this thought, it would not be appropriate to speak about libidinal object constancy or aggressive object constancy, though it is appropriate and useful to characterize object constancy according to the libidinal-aggressive drive cathexis of the primary love object representation. Thus, one can speak of object constancy with a predominantly libidinal attachment, or as one associated with an aggressive, pain-inflicting constant object as in the powerful sadomasochistic attachments of certain abused children. The achievement of some degree of beginning level of constancy is the result of various processes which in healthy development includes predominantly libidinal components as well as the decathexis of drive influences. Further, object constancy is, as has been stated before, closely connected with an emerging of the self, i.e., self-constancy, or of an ego identity due to individuation.

Kernberg (1976) states: "This organization implies:

- "1. A consolidation of ego structure connected with a sense of continuity of the self (the self being the organization of the self-image components of introjections and identifications) to which the child's perception of its functioning in all areas of its life and its progressive sense of mastering the basic adaptational task contribute significantly (Murphy, 1976);
- "2. A consistent, overall conception of the 'world of objects' derived from the organization of the object-image components of introjections and identifications and a sense of consistency in one's own interpersonal interactions, the behavioral aspects—that is, general consistency in the behavior patterns—being even more important aspects of ego identity than those of identifications; and
- "3. A recognition of this consistency in interactions as characteristic of the individual by his interpersonal environment and, in turn, the perception by the individual of this recognition by the environment ('conformation')" (p. 32).

However much we rely on the evolving cognitive capacity of the child to differentiate the external from the inner world by following the reality principle, it should also be recognized that the "representational world" (Sandler and Rosenblatt, 1962) never completely reflects the external world. Past wishes and fantasies, earlier identifications and introjections continuously influence this representation of relationships. It takes a long time before this object representation approximates more closely the external world

and in some ways this adaptation and discrepancy between the two is one which lasts throughout life. The cognitive factor not only assists in the assessment of the external world but also mediates between the inner perceived world and the perception of the external world.

As noted earlier, the concept of psychic structure is closely tied to the concepts of incorporation, internalization and identification. In addition, we may consider the process of "selective identifications" following Jacobson's (1964) propositions. The selection may refer to some aspects of the object and to some aspects of the self-representation, which are a reflection of the self-object mirroring, or it may relate to sequential or parallel interactions with many objects and the child's selection of those attributes of the objects which satisfy the child's needs.

### **Dyadic/Triadic Relationships**

Most of the investigations of early development have used as the field of observation the relationship of mother and infant. Thus, many formulations have stressed the need for a single, securely available, primary caregiver as the essential requirement for normal development. While this proposition can be confirmed by clinical practice and by data which we obtain from treatment of children and adults, we still have to examine the early relationship of children to a variety of different objects, such as the father and other caregivers available to the child, including housekeeper, nurse, grandparents and siblings.

When the relationships to other objects are considered or examined, they are often seen as dyadic ones, that is to say one studies mother-child relationship, father- or sibling-child relationship and compares the findings of one relationship to the other. Often, the proposition is made that the relationship to the primary caregiver, the mother, is the prototype for all subsequent relationships. There is evidence that there can be a primary caregiver other than the mother with whom bonding can occur. Today, when fathers not only participate in early child care, but are sometimes the primary caretaker, early bonding and attachment may occur with the father. Studies such as those by Lamb (1977) and Sroufe and Waters (1977) indicate the interchangeability of the preference which occurs dependent on who among the adults provides secure attachment. It is also of interest to note the result of attachment of child to both parents and its effect on further development (Parkes and Stevenson-Hinde, 1982).

Freud (1938) claimed that the relationship between an infant and his mother was not only the most important "object relation" but also the prototype of all subsequent love relations. Undoubtedly, it has oc-



curred to many that a good relationship with the father might compensate for a poor relationship with the mother, or of all subsequent love relations or, indeed, vice versa. Both Lamb (1977) and Main and Weston (1981) have repeated the stranger-situation procedure so that the baby is accompanied to the laboratory once by the mother and at another time by the father. Neither investigator found a predictable relationship between patterns of behavior displayed with mother and with father; that is, a baby judged securely attached to the mother was equally likely to be securely or anxiously attached to the father. In the Main and Weston study, infants were observed again in the stranger situation with mother, and the pattern of behavior displayed was stable, as previously shown by Connell (1976) and Waters (1978). Several infants found anxious-avoidant with mother but securely attached to the father were nonetheless exceptionally upset at the father's leave-taking, screaming and wrapping their arms around his knees to prevent it. Using separate assessment of the behavior of both parents, the investigators interpret these findings as evidence for an *"effect of relationship upon relationship."*

These findings are important for several reasons. First, they help us to see the infant as an active being who forms different relationships with different persons. Second, they counteract an understandable suspicion that might be aroused by the stability findings cited earlier—a suspicion that stranger-situation behavior, being stable with respect to the same individual, is simply a matter of infant temperament. Main and Weston's findings suggest that stranger-situation classifications reflect established patterns of interaction with father, as well as with mother. Assuming this to be the case, joint classifications are extremely useful. Using play sessions, Main and Weston found evidence of actual disturbance (i.e., stereotypes, inappropriate affect, and "odd" behavior) in almost every baby judged to be anxiously attached to but avoidant with both parents, but none in the babies securely attached to just one parent, either mother or father.

Where there are securely available relationships, one then has to examine the possibility of a hierarchy of attachment figures. To this consideration we have to add the *"effect of relationship on relationship."* This formulation refers to the effect of a good or inappropriate relationship to one parent or caregiver of infant behavior on another available object. For instance, if mother is not securely available, the child may show anxiety when the father, who is securely available, intends to leave. There is then a carryover of experience from one to another until a more secure

differentiation of relationship can occur. We intend to broaden this term of *"effect of relationship on relationship"* to include the child's observation and recognition of the relationship which a primary caregiver has with others, and thereby shift from the dyadic to an early triadic constellation.

The young child observes the mother's relationship to the father, grandparents and siblings. In identifying with the mother, the child imitates and identifies with her relationship to others. This is quite visible when we observe the child's reaction to the birth of a sibling or to the parents' relationship to a younger sibling. (Studies by Kendrick and Dunn (1982) define dyadic and triadic differently. We find their definitions not useful for our purposes, though we can understand that their definition is useful for certain kinds of experimental research.) He or she may then wish to be treated like the sibling, expecting a similar attitude, or the child may carry out mother's or father's role with the sibling. Since the child is usually close in age to the sibling, with needs and desires not too distant from his or her own earlier ones, we may observe regression in the older child, a regression which serves not only the need for a repetition of earlier gratification but also expresses indirectly and defensively feelings of rivalry and envy toward the younger sibling. Such rivalry with the sibling accentuates the need for reconfirmation of the possession of the parents and the wish to eliminate the rival. These formulations remind us of those triadic components which we traditionally ascribe to the phallic-oedipal period. It is, therefore, our assumption that the triadic or multiple relationships in the functioning family constitute the matrix within which younger children elaborate primary relationships, extracting from various forms of experience those which are most synchronous with their development. This hierarchy in the object choice includes the dyadic relationship of early childhood, in the context of the triadic relationships that characterize family functioning. Even when the average expectable family has been reduced to a single parent or caregiver, the psychological presence and influence of triadic demands, conflicts and yearnings is conveyed by the attitudes, memories, transferences and expectations of the caregiving adult.

At a time when it is possible that mother and father may be equally available to the child from infancy on, it will be important to study the interaction system, including the difference in relationships and those aspects which are shared. In other words, how could dual caregiving interfere with the symbiotic nature of early ties and how could it facilitate and foster the evolvment of individuation and self-object differentiation?

When we study the significance of friendships in the life history of people, particularly those that have evolved since childhood, one may be able to detect the characteristics and repetitive patterns of early attachments and their lasting effects. Can these be seen only as a spin-off of primary relationships or are they additions with features similar to and different from those with primary objects? We can also view the relationship to siblings with these questions in mind. In reference to our topic of object constancy, the role of multiple objects and their relationship to the primary object is crucial.

From the point of view of object constancy, we can therefore assume that the child may acquire various object representations which are consolidated and synthesized like a mosaic that unifies in a process; this process enables the developing child to utilize such object representations in an increasingly autonomous way. The individual's need to unify is accompanied by the process of continuous differentiation, i.e., by the experience of maturation as well as different external circumstances, the child individuates and gains a sense of himself as unique as he separates from the object and achieves the capacities of object constancy and self constancy, always in the form of object and self representations. Thus, the various forms of relationship contribute within a normal developmental experience, heightening and ranking the significance of object choices in subtle and quite ways. Freud (1923) was concerned with the following from *The Ego and the Id*: "... the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexis and ... contains the history of those object choices" (p. 29), and "... the effects of the first identifications made in earliest childhood will be general and lasting" (p. 31).

We emphasize that Freud spoke about identifications and therefore assume the significance of many primary objects. It is quite clear that when Freud wrote this statement, he did not refer just to the first 3 years of life. That means, if we speak about object constancy, we must pursue its unfolding role during the phallic and oedipal phase as well as subsequent phases of development. The early representation of the mother changes throughout development. Under the influence of new alliances and new conflict solutions and compromises, gender identity and oedipal constellations evoke changing relationships and attitudes. Thus, when we speak of object constancy as a psychic capacity or as a set of ego functions, we must assume that these functions continue to change and take on new structural qualities. Loewald (1980) states: "Different psychic structures are characterized by different ways of functioning; they perform mental functions in differently organized process patterns and

configurations, rather than performing different mental functions." Representations take on different quantitative and qualitative features as new differentiations occur under the impact of evolving maturation.

Both single figures of attachment and the plurality of composite attachment figures are represented in continuous shifts and changes. The shifting hierarchy of single and composite object representations in differing developmental, dynamic and social situations will require much more study. For example, will the preference of a child for one or another significant object change if both objects are equally available and will the preference change or become modified according to the developmental tasks and the environmental demands?

We are stressing two points: (1) There is a continuum in the unfolding functions of object constancy from dyadic to triadic patterns, going from the infant-parent relationship beyond the dyadic relationship, and (2) the concept of constancy may be misleading unless it is seen as the formation of a foundation on which other functions and structures can be erected. The predictability and patterning of linkages of object constancy functions give it the characteristics of a psychic structure.

Evolving self-representation is associated with resonating changes in the perception of object relations. This does not imply that the object actually changes in relationship to the child, but that the child extracts from the external world those perceptions, experiences and characteristics which are needed for further development. The child's cognitive maturation is a significant factor in the process of achieving an internal stable structure. The capacity to assess and to differentiate the external from the internal world and the increasing learning ability which contributes to a sense of achievement and self-reliance are accompanied by elaborations and refinement of individuation along with expectable shifts in the availability and functions of object representations. All these further a sense of confidence in independence and a realistic self-esteem.

### Differentiation

There is one line of development that proceeds from earliest orchestration of the neonate organismic response to imitation, incorporation and identification. This leads to structure formation and to object constancy. There is also the line of increasing differentiation, which is often less carefully outlined. The term differentiation can refer to the increased specificity of function, i.e., to the line from simple, more total responses to more and more complex and specific functions, which also are associated with structure

formation. These lines of identification and differentiation continuously interact with an increasing stimulation of and dependence on the integrative and synthetic functions of the ego. In addition, differentiation in the context of object relations also refers to the difference of self *from* others.

Separateness signifies independence as well as individuation in the developmental achievement and awareness of uniqueness (identity) and special characteristics. Thus, to identify with and to be different from the objects are interconnecting developmental processes. These processes also contribute to the issues of continuity and discontinuity in development. The stranger reaction is an example. Here the recognition of the differences between objects leads to a specific reaction based on attachment. When the attachment becomes secure, new objects can become familiar and new relationships permit more choices. It is important to study these processes when mother and father are both available from infancy with comparable affective-emphatic interactions.

Our focus on differentiation in this paper points to the continuous evolvement of new steps beyond the third year of life, including gender differentiation and oedipal configurations. In these successive differentiations identification with the same sex and the longing for the opposite sex are bound together with conflictual consequences, compromise formation and successive levels of conflict resolution. A new structure arises, e.g., the superego, and old structures are modified, e.g., object constancy.

In this dynamic unfolding of the complexity of structures and functions of the mind the child feels the exhilaration of curiosity as the memories of early childhood fade. Certain vital functions such as object constancy and basic identifications persist and change the unbroken continuities of healthy development. Thus, the curiosity of the child is not limited to the exploration of the known and there is an increased awareness and interest in the new. Thus, in early childhood the novel cannot be totally different from what has already been recognized and incongruities can stimulate cognitive responses leading to further refinements of psychic structure and functions.

In the developmental line of incorporation and identification, we find stability and structural continuity. In the line of differentiation, we find the tolerance and awareness of incongruities which lead to individuation. The separation of object and self introduces object constancy and the continuous unfolding of a higher level of differentiation. In this connection, we may look at various ego functions and quote Hartmann (1950) "... I have mentioned ego functions opposing each other ... the intrapsychic correlations

and conflicts in the ego have hardly ever been consistently studied ... one speaks of 'the ego' as being rational, or realistic or an integrator, while actually those are characteristics of one or the other of its function ..." (p. 93). In the context of one line of exploration, we may say that there are those ego functions which synthesize, integrate, bind units together and then those which promote specificity and differentiation. The evolvement of the object representation and of the self is in continuous interchange with new forms of integration and new forms of differentiation.

Kernberg (1976) notes: "The normal outcome of identity formation is that primitive identifications are gradually replaced by selective, partial, sublimatory identifications in which only those aspects of object relations are internalized which are in harmony with the individual identity formation." This is to say that the measure of reality, that is by comparison and by testing of various objects, not only against inner wishes and fantasies, but against their real role, is a continuous process between the objective outer and the subjective inner world.

The relationship of the representation of the objects and the self depends greatly on the internalizing process through which those representations which fit the evolving individual self are selected and to what degree they are more or less associated with conflict and ambivalence or with conflict-free functioning and self-appraisal. Thus, object constancy is the beginning of capacity, a first step in the stabilization of the primary object representation, reflecting the nature of parent-child relationship as well as the internalizing process in the formation of the object representation.

### Applications

In an earlier paper (Solnit, 1982), practical applications of object constancy as a theoretical proposition were noted. In fact, these theory-building explorations were largely stimulated by our close examination of how psychoanalytic theory could be useful in the understanding of "... children's reactions to the temporary loss of their parents, to parental deprivation and the children's recovery from such loss and deprivation." In this context, we examined child placement conflicts (Goldstein et al., 1973, 1979), stating:

"From a (young) child's point of view, no absence from his parents is temporary if it exceeds the period of time during which a child, always according to his age and state of development, can preserve inner ties to them" (Goldstein et al., 1979, p. 40).

"Young children have a deep biopsychological need for an attachment in order not to be overwhelmed by their feelings of helplessness associated with the dangers of the external world; and at the same time they



require these attachments and the safeguarding presence of a primary love object to modulate and make tolerable the pressure of the drives, especially those of aggression. They will tend to form new attachments desperately, urgently and fearfully once there are no sustaining inner ties to parents" (Solnit, 1982, p. 216).

"The very young infant, for example, may not yet have formed an attachment, but—out of his acute sense of helplessness—will develop one rather rapidly with his new caretakers" (Goldstein et al., 1979, p. 41).

"For the older child, the quality of his psychological tie to his absent parents will determine his capacity to sustain a separation from them before he (is ready, willing and able to) acquires a new 'psychological parent'" (Goldstein et al., 1979, p. 41)—a relationship that will enable him to regain or achieve for the first time those capabilities subsumed under the capacity for object constancy. "Once new psychological relationships form, separation from the substitute parents becomes no less painful and no less damaging to a child than his separation from natural or adoptive parents" (p. 41).

These applications are relevant to the issues confronted by children who have lost their parents through death, divorce or other forms of separation that become prolonged or permanent. Of particular significance is the young child's need for replacements when there has been such a loss.

Other applications include the role of object constancy in the therapeutic situation. Transference phenomena in the psychoanalytic situation dramatize the roots of primary, past relationships and the echoes of object constancy as a sustaining residue of powerful mutual relationships and attachments.

### Conclusion

This paper defines and examines the concept of object constancy as a milestone in development. We examine the evolution of object constancy in the context of the child's multiple primary relationships and in the context of the separation-individuation processes of development. The sequences of early development are outlined, stressing the significance of more than one relationship, the dyadic one, in the first years of life. Triadic and multiple relationships, under normal circumstances, contribute to the child's repertoire of social interests and to the choice of significant and enduring relationships. These primary love

objects exert a persisting and changing influence as progressive differentiation of objects and successive refinements of individuation continue. This process continues throughout childhood and the rest of life. These theoretical propositions prepare the way for systematic clinical studies of the differing ways in which primary caregivers relate to a particular child and the dynamic, unifying ways in which that child forms a mosaic of autonomous object representations in the service of progressive development.

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